

Compliance to Health Protocols in the Implementation of the 2020 Regional Elections

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Abstract: *The regional elections (Pilkada) of 2020 have been concluded, and could be considered a success. Yet, its implementation cannot be said to be entirely successful, considering the lack of concern of political parties in helping the Government handle the Covid-19 pandemic through their political campaigns. This study intends to discuss political communication carried out by political parties in an effort to raise awareness of preventing the spread of Covid-19 to the public during the 2020 Pilkada in Indonesia. The approach taken is qualitative, collecting data through in-depth interviews, with the subjects comprising of representatives of political parties and political communication experts. The study finds that the bulk of the political campaigns carried out by political parties is focused on winning the elections, rather than on efforts to help deal with Covid-19. Community involvement also tends to be low in the 2020 elections, due to a lack of understanding of digital literacy and reluctance to vote due to a lack of understanding of health protocols.*

Keywords: *health protocols; regional elections; community involvement.*

Introduction

The issue of holding the *Pilkada* (regional elections) became the topic for a heated debate in the second half of 2020, raising a debate due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which as of now has yet to be resolved in Indonesia. Some countries that were considered to be successful in carrying out elections amid this pandemic are South Korea, noted as the first country to hold elections during the pandemic, on April 15, 2020; and Singapore, on July 10, 2020 (Maharani, 2020). Among the keys to

the success of the elections in South Korea in suppressing the spread of Covid 19 are preventing crowds by conducting early voting and enforcing strict application of health protocols for both voters and implementing officials (Farisa, 2020).

Various arguments supporting and opposing the *Pilkada* have emerged in the debate. One of the stronger objections was that the Government needed careful preparations, both during the campaign period, and during the voting, especially regarding the procurement of personal

protective equipment (PPE) for officials and voters. (Andi, 2020). This was certainly a challenge for the Government to be able to invite various parties to comply with health protocols in running this 'festival of democracy'.

Two major religious organizations, the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, called for the postponement of the 2020 *Pilkada*, arguing that the safety of human beings was much more important than organizing the *Pilkada*, due to its potential for creating new clusters in terms of transmission. This was emphasized by PB Nahdlatul Ulama, who emphasized that survival by observing the health protocol is as important as the continuity of the economic and political life of a society (Dewi, 2020). Here, it can be seen that the objections of some people to the implementation of *Pilkada* were caused by reasons of human health and safety.

However, the Indonesian Government was determined with its decision to hold the *Pilkada* on December 9, 2020. As confirmed by presidential spokesman Fadjroel Rachman, the 2020 *Pilkada* would continue to be carried out in strict compliance with health protocols (Dharmastuti, 2020). Therefore, the General Election Commission (KPU) was to immediately create regulations to guarantee the implementation of *Pilkada* while adhering to health protocols to prevent the increasingly wide spread of Covid-19.

Apart from the importance of paying attention to health protocols during the campaign and implementation of the 2020 *Pilkada*, another challenge was the importance of delivering the agenda of handling Covid-19 as one of the campaign

materials for participating candidates. This is reasonable, considering that of the 309 regions that participated in the 2020 *Pilkada*, as many as 45 cities/regencies were listed in the red zone, with a high risk in terms of transmission (Makdori, 2020). This should have been of concern to the Government, and therefore the handling of Covid-19 should be used in the *Pilkada* campaign. Thus, candidates for regional heads must prepare this in their campaign debate materials.

The 2020 *Pilkada* had differences in terms of the debate themes to be raised by regional head candidates, compared to the previous *Pilkada*. The themes were no longer dominated by issues such as identity politics, corruption, nepotism and money politics, but instead have shifted to a more pressing issue, namely efforts to prevent and overcome Covid-19 (Chaterine, 2020). This was confirmed by Minister of Home Affairs Tito Karnavian's, asking the General Election Commission (KPU) to design the 2020 *Pilkada* debate theme to focus on handling Covid-19, which according to him could be objectively used to test the quality of regional head candidates, especially in overcoming crisis (Farisa, 2020). This theme can also be used to measure the awareness and intelligence of candidates in dealing with Covid-19.

By the end of September 2020, the KPU has finalized regulations on campaign materials/themes that focus on the handling of Covid-19 as stipulated in PKPU no.13/2020 Article 59F, which reads:

The KPU regulates materials for public debate or open debate in the form of candidate pairs' visions and missions in an effort to solve problems and advance their

regions. In addition, the materials for public debate or open debate should also include material on the candidates' policies and strategies in fighting the Covid-19 pandemic.

and Article 59G, which reads:

In addition to materials for public debate or open debate as referred to in letter F, it also contains materials on policies and strategies for handling, prevention and control of Corona Virus Disease 2019 (Covid-19).

These two articles (59 F and 59 G) definitely require candidates to prepare campaign materials related to the handling of Covid 19, which indirectly also urges political parties that support candidate pairs to start formulating campaign materials as well as possible. Voters would also be more objective and intelligent in voting for their candidates.

The concern for compliance in carrying out health protocols is very interesting in relation to political activities, especially regarding the 2020 Indonesian regional elections. Beginning from the process of implementing the campaign, to the Election Day, this shows a picture of how the candidates and also the political parties that support them are concerned about human health and safety issues. In addition, public participation in conducting elections is also an interesting challenge.

In connection with the dynamics of the 2020 *Pilkada*, this research intends to see **how political communication is carried out by political parties in an effort to raise awareness of preventing the spread of Covid-19 to the public in the 2020 *Pilkada***. This problem has becomes interesting because of a shift in

issues, which no longer emphasized political issues alone, but involved social issues, especially health. In addition, until now there is still limited research linking regional elections or elections in general with the Covid-19 pandemic. The purpose of this study is to analyze the concern of political parties participating in the elections in terms of efforts to prevent the transmission of Covid 19 in the regional elections.

Elections are 'festivals of democracy' and the government would certainly ensure the implementation of this process. The logistics of elections would of course be guaranteed in various formats by the government in the form of protecting the rights of voters such as freedom to express opinion, right to associate and assemble, and right to expression (Landman and Splendore, 2020; Isaac, 2013; Malleson, 2018); Beacháin & Kevlihan, 2015).). Therefore, holding elections is the responsibility of the government to its citizens.

However, the implementation of the 2020 regional elections can be said to be different, due to the situation of the Covid-19 pandemic. In the period between February and August 2020, more than 70 countries were to hold elections either at the national or local/regional levels, and 54 of them proceeded with the process, while the remaining countries postponed them (James and Alihodzic 2020). Governments must prepare everything related to elections more carefully and still prioritize health and also efforts to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus (Kousser et al, 2021; Morris & Miller, 2021; Johnson et al, 2020; Sircar, 2021; James, 2021; Vampa, 2021).

Thus, the challenges faced by the government in holding elections in 2020 were not only limited to supervising a democratic process, but also ensuring that public health is maintained. One of the most important factors in carrying out this democratic process is ensuring that the virus does not spread during the voting. The Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) makes it clear that:

Consideration should also be given to the safe conduct of activities throughout the entire electoral cycle (voter registration, staff recruitment and training, candidate nomination, political campaigning, procurement and electoral dispute resolution (IDEA, 2020a, p. 1).

For Indonesia, which continued to hold the voting in-person, this had a great potential to create new clusters for the spread of Covid-19. The government must think about ensuring that the election process can run in accordance with established health protocols.

Postponement of the *pilkada* is one possible alternative, however, this is a prerogative of the government. One of the considerations taken is *humanitarian postponement*. This concept, according to James and Alihodzic (2020, p. 348) refers to “where elections might not take place because of threats to human life and security because of natural disasters”. However, postponing the elections can raise political distrust, images of anti-democracy as well as various kinds of problems. In many countries, it is believed that postponement of elections will not provide much certainty about the timing of implementation.

As part of democracy, elections during a pandemic are highly dependent, not only on the government, but also the participating political parties. Campaigns run by political parties as part of political communication are highly influential in the election implementation process, especially in an effort to convey messages of compliance with health protocols.

The concern of political parties in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic is one of the important things to prevent the spread in regions, especially ahead of the elections. In political campaigns delivered by each regional head candidate backed by a certain political party, it can be used in addition to urging supporters to comply with health protocols. In addition, it is also interesting to see the extent to which programs related to the handling of Covid 19 are included as the main material presented in each campaign.

Political campaigns are an important part of the political communication built by regional head candidates and their supporters. Political communication according to McNair (2011, p. 4) is:

1. All forms of communication are undertaken by politicians and other political actors for the purpose of achieving specific objectives.
2. Communication addressed to these actors by non-politicians such as voters and newspaper columnists.
3. Communication about these actors and their activities, as contained in news reports, editorials, and other forms of media discussion of politics.

From this definition it is clear that political communication encompasses all forms of communication that are used to achieve a goal, which in this case is the

election/regional election. The communication that occurs will usually be seen in the media.

In addition, political campaigns in elections are also used to clearly describe the programs proposed by political candidates/actors involved in them and this also functions to influence decisions in voting (Miller, 2007; Rowbottom, 2010; Lilleker, 2012; Weber, 2013; Miller, 2007; Panagopoulos, 2016; Anuar, 2014; Carsey, 2011). The importance of program content in campaign was also explained by Wasswa (2013, p. 1): "Today, political victories are determined by the quantity and quality of information that campaigns can access with regards to political rivals and constituents". Thus, it is true that the quality and quantity of information about political opponents conveyed in the campaign can greatly influence a candidate's victory.

In connection with the implementation of regional elections during the Covid-19 pandemic, it is also important to understand not only the implementation of health protocols that voters and officials must comply with in the election process, but also the materials in the campaign presented. Campaign material is important, especially to find out the extent of concern of regional head candidates regarding the handling of Covid-19. This can also be a reason for citizens to decide on who to give their votes to. Political parties must show their concern for the strategies and efforts made in dealing with Covid-19 from the perspective of the candidates.

During this pandemic, much of the campaign process used digital media. In many countries, digital campaigns are uncommon, as most campaigns are carried out traditionally/non-digitally (IDEA,

2020b). Digital campaigns require political parties to adapt, which of course will also affect the participation and support of prospective voters.

The use of the internet in digital campaigns poses a separate challenge in the process of delivering information, which is not only limited to access but also concerns understanding in terms of its use. This is also emphasized by IDEA (2020b, p. 16), that "Access to the internet and internet literacy are the primary barriers... and there are also widespread concerns related to the vulnerability of digital platforms to disinformation and manipulation". Therefore, in its implementation, political parties must regulate the mechanism in terms of preparedness of internet literacy regarding access for prospective voters.

Methods

The research was conducted from September to early December 2020 before the elections were held on December 9, 2020. This study is not intended to generalize what political parties participating in the elections have done in carrying out the health protocol; however, it focuses on the preparation of political communication through campaigns built around efforts to suppress the spread of Covid 19 during the regional elections. This is related to the appeal by the Government and the General Election Commission. Therefore this study uses a qualitative approach because it aims to understand the efforts made by political parties participating in the *Pilkada* as well as community involvement in the 2020 regional elections. Furthermore, this study aims to connect the perspectives of social observers with the efforts made by

political parties. The use of a qualitative approach is considered relevant to answer this research topic. The understanding of qualitative methods according to Creswell (2014, p. 4) is "... the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem". Thus, here a qualitative approach can be used to describe the understanding obtained from individual/group experiences through the opinions of participants/informants.

The method used in this study is the case study method. The selection of this method is considered appropriate because according to Yin (2014, p. 96), "a case study involves the set of a case within a real-life contemporary context or setting. The case may be a concrete entity, such as an individual, a small group, an organization or a partnership". This is of course closely related to the object of this research, which is very clearly focused on the regional election during the pandemic and also the involvement of political parties in it.

Data used in this study include primary data obtained from interviews with informants/participants, namely: **RW** (secretary general of a major political party), **AA** (political communication expert) and **SB** (Regional Elections Legal Socialization, Indonesian National Police). This selection is also based on the consideration of obtaining balanced information both in terms of opinions and observations. Meanwhile, secondary data were obtained from various online sources. K

Data management carried out in qualitative research, according to Miles and Huberman (1992), is carried out through 3 (three) stages, namely: reduction, in which data obtained from the

field is simplified; data presentation, namely after the data is simplified, in this stage an understanding of the data is obtained; and finally, drawing conclusions, where the data that has been understood by the researcher are then analyzed by linking theories or concepts that have been previously prepared. All of these are included in a process known as coding.

Result and Discussion

Based on the research results obtained through in-depth interviews about the 2020 simultaneous regional elections, which were carried out during the pandemic, the researchers tried to analyze several related concepts. The findings were divided into many categories by the researchers, as follows:

1. Placing Health Issues in Regional Elections as a Central Issue

The Indonesian government in carrying out regional elections during this pandemic has made health issues a top priority. This is evident from the statement by **SB**, who emphasized that "the KPU as the organizer of the elections must ensure that a health protocol must be applied during the regional election process." This statement is in line with what was stated by the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA, 2020a, p.1) that "consideration should also be given to the safe conduct of activities throughout the entire electoral cycle". So basically the implementation of *Pilkada* in Indonesia has followed the provisions of the health protocol carried out by several countries which also conducted elections in the same period.

This protocol is applied in every stage of the regional election starting from

the campaign, candidate debate, and finally during voting at the polling stations taking place on December 9, 2020. This protocol must be followed by every registered candidate, as well as the public as participants in the 2020 regional elections. **RW**, a political party secretary general said that “traditional campaigns that tend to gather masses have decreased, and are starting to be replaced by the use of alternative online media to convey the vision and mission of the regional leader candidates”. However, in reality the online media has not been fully able to reach all areas, due to poor internet network connections. In addition, the level of digital literacy of the community tends to be low. These problems indirectly affected the process of implementing the *Pilkada*, and the awareness of health protocols carried out by the voters within the community.

The research findings also show that there are still many voters who still do not understand the importance of health protocols. This was confirmed by **AA**, a communication expert, who saw that “people, especially those far from Jakarta, still do not understand the risks of Covid-19 and tend not to understand the health protocols that have been announced by the Government”. Thus, it is clear that the existence of health protocols in the regional head elections does not guarantee a good understanding in carrying them out.

The Indonesian government intensively encourages the public to pay attention to and comply with health protocols in the implementation of regional elections during the Covid pandemic; however the level of compliance and understanding of the voting community are still very limited.

This happens because both the Government and political parties, through candidates who are running for the elections, have not yet focused on public understanding of health protocols but rather on the successful implementation of health protocols at the 2020 election event.

2. Concern of Political Parties in Handling Covid-19 in Regional Elections

Even though Covid-19 has become a pandemic throughout the world, including in Indonesia, the issues related to handling and resolving the Covid-19 pandemic are still low. The community, as the victims affected by the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, needs to be given information about this. This is also reinforced by PKPU no.13/2020 Article 59 G which clearly states that:

In addition to materials for public debate or open debate as referred to in letter F, it also contains materials on policies and strategies for handling, prevention and control of Corona Virus Disease 2019 (Covid-19).

One of the KPU's focal points seems to be educating the public, namely through the efforts made by candidates in dealing with the ongoing pandemic through debates. Debates between regional head candidates, as part of this year's political campaign, have the main focus of handling the Covid-19 pandemic in addition to other themes such as accelerating development, development targets, regional harmonization and the like.

However, in the presentations of the vision and mission of candidates running in the 2020 regional elections,

there has been almost no discussion about the handling, prevention and control of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Research observation also shows that candidates did emphasize adherence to health protocols, but no one had a clear program on handling and overcoming Covid-19, and all still depended on the main programs run by the Government. The same thing was seen in the debates, where the candidates seemed to have minimal knowledge of programs to handle the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, the final outcome expected by the KPU, namely to not stick to traditional issues such as money politics and communal violence, and to switch to efforts to deal with Covid-19, had not been achieved by the candidates.

Limited resources and a lack of alternative options in the implementation of regional head elections during the pandemic have made political parties that back the candidates only focus on certain regions. This focus on certain areas is based on the largest vote acquisition obtained by the political parties concerned in the elections held in the previous period. This was stated by RW, admitting that

The main objective of political parties in the Pilkada is to get the most votes and place our candidates as regional heads, therefore we are especially focused on areas where our members have succeeded in becoming regional heads in the previous period.

From this opinion, it is clear that political parties gave priority to their interests in winning the regional elections, rather than national interests. Political parties' interest in combating the Covid-19

pandemic was limited to areas under their control (locally) and efforts to 'defend' these areas, rather than as a form of national concern.

Likewise, the society in the area where the elections were held tends to base their votes on their political party preference, rather than the actual quality of the vision and mission of the candidate pairs carried by the political party. This was due to the lack of information obtained by the local community on the issue of the Covid-19 pandemic. This situation was confirmed by AA, who emphasized that "the role of political parties in the regional elections is not only as agents of political change, but also as carriers of social change". Therefore, using the *Pilkada* as an effort to convey messages to prevent the spread of Covid-19 is difficult to implement, because the focus of political parties was still oriented towards party interests, which had a local scope in the context of the 2020 regional elections.

3. Online Political Campaigns and Community Political Participation

The pandemic situation has resulted in the creation of specific regulations applicable to the regional elections process that makes it difficult for the public, candidate pairs and also political parties to follow, because everything must be submitted online. The delivery of political messages is usually done in the form of campaigns and during this pandemic the campaign process was carried out online. One form of understanding of political campaigns according to Mc Nair (2011, p. 4) is "All forms of communication undertaken by politicians and other political actors for

the purpose of achieving specific objectives". The political campaigns in the regional elections during this pandemic were carried out online with the aim of presenting the programs proposed by candidates and also conveying the ideology of the supporting parties. However, in its implementation, it is not easy to do, and this can be seen from the RW's affirmation:

The implementation of the campaign using online methods to comply with health protocols in the 2020 elections makes the above goals difficult to achieve. Let's not talk about the ideology of the political parties. Even the vision and mission and programs of the regional head candidates were difficult enough to share with the public.

This shows that candidates and their supporting political parties have not found an effective way of gathering and attracting the masses through online means.

Online campaigns are deemed insufficient to attract attention and provide knowledge to the public, not only regarding the candidates they will hopefully vote for, but also the programs offered. Based on research on regional elections conducted by IDEA (2020b), it shows that in many countries, digital campaigns are indeed a novelty, as most political campaigns continue to be carried out traditionally or through non-digital means. Therefore, the experience of the regional elections carried out by the Indonesian Government was not so much different from that of other countries in 2020.

In addition, the regional elections that were held during this pandemic also caused fear in the community, which resulted in people hesitating to exercise their voting rights on the Election Day, even though there were health protocols that must be adhered to. This can be seen not only from the low digital literacy experienced by the voting community, but also from the doubts and calls to not give votes that had appeared as soon as the decision was made that the elections were still being held during the pandemic.

The regional elections that were carried out during the pandemic have passed, and have become one of the historical records in the world of Indonesian politics. The government's decision to continue implementing the *Pilkada* was also a bold and difficult decision. However, the 2020 regional elections, as a form of 'festival of democracy' seemed to be less successful than expected, because the level of community participation was still low. This happened not only because of problems with adherence to health protocols, but also due to limited knowledge of the digital world

Conclusion

The efforts made by the Government to encourage political parties participating in the regional elections to carry out political campaigns/communications that could encourage people to care about health protocols in the 2020 regional elections did not seem to have received attention. Encouraging adherence to health protocols in the implementation of the 2020 *Pilkada* was a most important issue for all involved parties: the Government,

the political parties backing the candidates, and the voting community. This happened because the implementation of the regional election cannot be fully carried out online considering the low level of digital literacy understanding and compliance with the implementation of health protocols.

The involvement of political parties in relation to the handling and prevention of Covid-19 through campaigns carried out by candidate pairs who run for the 2020 regional elections was also unclear. This happened because political parties were still oriented towards winning the regional elections, and have not yet touched on the national interest. In other words, political parties cannot yet be used as agents of change.

Political campaigns that are carried out online were deemed insufficient to attract public attention, especially in providing knowledge of the programs being offered. This happened not only because of the low digital literacy experienced by the voting community but also because of doubts and fears to participate in regional elections during the pandemic. Thus, even though the 2020 regional elections were successfully implemented, community involvement was still low.

About Authors

Rizaldi Parani graduated with a Bachelor of Sociology at the University of Indonesia in 1993 and a Masters in Industrial Relations at The University of Sydney in 1996 and most recently earned a Doctorate in Communication at The Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in 2016. He has taught in the Department of Sociology, FISIP- UI from the period

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